teaching and learning

DECEMBER 1976

BITS AND PIECES

Note of Explanation: The Learning Development Office is as affected by the time of year as other bodies on campus. Indeed, should you choose to drop by and visit us, you would first have to dig your way through mounds of computer print-outs, envelopes and course evaluation forms. However, driven by our zeal and committment to serve the faculty of this campus and to keep them in touch with "what's happening in teaching" we have valiantly put together yet another newsletter for you to read. The format is simply the throwing together of 'bits and pieces' of information totally unrelated but hopefully interesting - hence the title.

Hoping you have an enjoyable and restful holiday season,

Learning Development Office Staff
Ron Smith
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concordia university

THERE'S NO PERCENTAGE IN COLLEGE GRADES*

by Steven M. Cahn and Patricia Kitcher

Grading is one of a teacher's least pleaant tasks, and lately it has become even more burdensome.

The inflation of grades over the last few years confronts a conscientious instructor with a dilemma, for most of us now realize that grade inflation harms both good and poor students. Fine scholars and excellent programs are unable to find one another through the thick screen of artificial grades. Less competent students can select courses where high grades are offered for little or no work, thus depriving themselves of the chance to benefit from their college years.

A concerned teacher is thus tempted to stop grade inflation by giving realistic grades.

Disaster for the Non-Tenured

But what will be the result of this responsible move? Students are likely to complain that the new system is unfair, and the instructor's course enrollment will probably drop precipitously - a disastrous situation for an untenured professor and a very unwelcome one for any faculty member.

Worse still, how can an instructor answer a good student who protests, as one of ours did, that while improving the grading system may be a noble goal, it is unjust to award him a B for doing more and better work than students who will easily secure A's in other courses?

The problem appears intractable, since whichever teacher, department, or institution takes the first steps toward deflation, those students affected will be at a serious disadvantage in competing with the beneficiaries of inflated grading.

However, a quite simple, mechanical procedure would solve most of the difficulties. College transcripts now indicate nothing but the grade a student received in each of his courses.

Thus, a semester's transcript for A.B. Jones might read

English Comp:C+
Logic:A
Calculus:B
American History:B
French:B+

The overall record seems strong, except in English, but anyone aware of grade inflation will wonder what these marks really mean.

Suppose a student's transcript indicated not only the grade received but also the number of students enrolled in that course and the percentage of students who received an equal or higher grade.

A.B. Jone's transcript might then read:

English Comp:C+(#35 57%)
Logic:A(#47 88%)
Calculus:B(#85 94%)
American History:B(#38 85%)
French:B+(#15 53%)

This transcript yields more solid information. Since three of Jones' instructors, those in logic, calculus, and American history, have awarded high grades to virtual all their studnets, we cannot be sure how well Jones did in these courses.

Still, if this system of reporting grades were adopted, no one, including the student, would be misled by meaningless grades. Inflation in a particular course would be obvious, and teachers would soon realize tha awarding everyone an A or B distinguished no one.

Curves : Irresponsible

Furthermore, not only would grade inflation be exposed, but so would the equally unfair practice of undergrading. And, as a bonus, this system would undermine the traditional "gut course," for students would no longer be quick to enroll, realizing that the nature of the course would be apparent from their own transcripts.

Note that this suggestion for reporting grades lends no support whatever to the irresponsible practice of grading on a curve, a procedure in which a judgment as to how well a student has learned particular subjec matter depends upon determining how well his fellow students have done so.

The system proposed here would not encourage any teacher to award exactly 10 per cent A's or 10 per cent F's. Indeed, were this pattern to appear, we would quickly suspect the instructor of resorting to grading on a curve.

There may seem to be a much simpler way of curing grade inflation that does not involve the time and expense of placing additional information on transcripts. Why not just pass a faculty resolution declaring that all professors should hence forth return to a pre-inflation grading scale?

That alternative, however, is far less satisfactory than the one we suggest. Grading is discretionary. No administrator or faculty committee could ever force a professor to deflate grades. The system of reporting we advocate does not pretend to compel misusers of the grading system to change their practice. But it will reveal the truth about those misusers.

Currying Favor with Students

A second reason for preferring our proposal is that, unfortunately, giving high grades is and always will be an effective way of currying favor with students.

Faculties can protect themselves against this temptation by making use of the more complete transcript on a permanent basis.

Grade reform will never be a popular topic. The fact that teachers must evaluate the quality of their students' work will always be a burden to both teachers and students. Let us try to make this aspect of education more bearable for both sides by establishing a reporting system as fair and helpful as possible.

*Taken from the Chronicle of Higher Education - September 27, 1976 - Vol. XIII - No. 4

GRADE INFLATION *

The discussion and debates about whether the recent rise in most students' grades represent a decline in standards have been increasing. The evidence of F's and D's becoming extinct, and C's becoming an endangered species, is too strong to deny. The reasons for the trends and, perhaps of even more importance, the implications for higher education, have not been resolved yet.

Stanford University has reinstated the grade of D this fall, after deciding its absence was creating worse problems in judging students than did its presence. A similar proposal has been made at the University of Oregon. Some campuses who have embraced Pass-Fail have had second thoughts, too (see *Change* Magazine, Sept. 1975).

A general view of the issue, and possibly a major stimulus for current debate, is available in *WAD-JA-GET: The Grading Game in American Education* by Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier (Hart Co., 1971). More recently the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 19, 1975) has offered the following theories to account for the higher grade trends:

- Faculty members, faced with the need to keep enrollment up in economic hard times, have become less willing to grade rigorously for fear of turning away students.

- Colleges have been recruiting increasingly diverse student bodies in terms of socio-economic background and intellectual abilities. So faculty members have shifted their grading practices rather than judge all students on traditional bases.

- Grade inflation itself becomes a spiraling process. Once faculty members hear of it on other campuses, they consciously or unconsciously begin to inflate the grades of their own students to give them an edge in the competition for jobs or places in professional schools.

- Faculty members have lost confidence in the value of what they are doing. Because they have doubts about the value of the "learning" they are offering students, they are unwilling to make rigorous judgments of whether students have mastered it.

- The addition of more "relevant and contemporary" materials to many courses has made mastering the subject matter easier for students, since they are being tested on materials that are part of their everyday experience rather than "relics from the high culture."

We can add two more possibilities from our own observations:

- Institutions have made it very easy for students to either delay or completely avoid the consequences of failing work, by allowing a course to be dropped prior to final examinations. The option of receiving an "incomplete" is also readily available. Either option drastically reduces the number of D's and F's, for a student would have to be quite ignorant or very unconcerned not to exercise one of them in the face of imminent failure.

- The increased use of self-instructional courses, such as PSI, have permitted students to recycle until content is mastered rather than receiving a lower grade.

*Taken from "Instructional Improvement & Evaluation" Published for the Office of Adademic Affairs, by Teaching Research, A division of the Oregon State System of Higher Education, Monmouth, Oregon Oct. 1975 Vol. 2 No. 1.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

Following is a list of problems related to the measurement of learning that participants in the 'Two-Part Workshop on Teaching' identified during Part II, November 26, 1976:-

1) the use of 'markers, T.A.'s' and the loss of control, follow-up

2) varied socio-cultural backgrounds of students

3) cheating

4) the students' ability to communicate (language and inquiry skills)

5) measurement of attitude changes, experiential learning

6) the limits of the classroom for learning

7) measuring participation and verbal activity

8) peer evaluation and group projects

9) case study evaluation

10) evaluating role playing and simulation

11) measuring analytic ability

12) dealing with short time frames

13) students' resistance to work (motivation)

) accreditation problems and studying only for the exam

15) developing flexible, individualized evaluation (e.g. modules, time constraint)

16) test anxiety/relaxation

17) objectivity/teacher's rating of students

18) evaluation time cost/logistics

19) self evaluation (gain) vs. criteria (overall standards)

20) set curriculum and standards to be met

21) comprehensive testing, time constraints

22) on the job evaluation (performance)

23) varied student output (term papers)

24) clarity of questions

The workshop began by listing these problems, then small groups formed to discuss specific areas of interest. Solutions to some of these problems were posed although time did not permit as full an exploration as was necessary.

In order to continue sharing ideas, concerns, resources etc. in the area of teaching, the Learning Development Office will be initiating a series of informal discussions during a lunch hour once a month or so. Everyone is welcome.

THE LARGE CLASS: WHO LIKES IT?

The Utah State University recently undertook an analysis of 22 large lecture classes ("large" was not defined). The results and helpful suggestions are available in their *Instructional Improvement Newsletter* (Occasional Paper No. 8, Spring 1973). The article points out how the "human interaction shortage" becomes the biggest issue for both faculty and students. The writers acknowledge that no evidence has emerged to make a convincing case for better learning in small classes, though faculty and students would definitely prefer them. The gains from large classes seem to be obvious only for arguing their efficiency in the allocation of resources. Interestingly, we have found some research to show that ratings by students are highest in classes of less than 30 or more than 100!

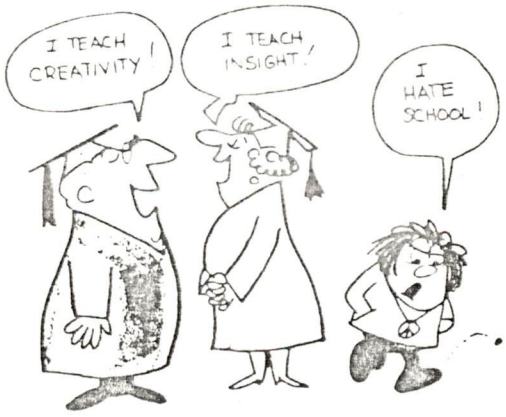
Since in the final analysis the case cannot yet be made for discontinuing large classes, the article includes suggestions for improving them. Three noteworthy ones were:

(1) The decision on class size should reflect a conscious plan of what students should learn in the class. If students' contributions are unnecessary and if the aim is essentially acquisition of data (as opposed to application) then the large group is a more efficient means.

(2) The instructor should not only be available but emit an atmosphere that convinces students that he wants to see them individually. A recent study of the Harbison winners (Danforth award for outstanding teacher in the nation) has shown that these 200 teachers used so many diverse methods that no model for effective teaching can be deduced from them. The only common element students described in their excellence was concern for students individually and wide involvement with them outside class.

(3) Transfer some of the information-dispensing to machines. Some of the data are repeated quarter after quarter. In those cases the teacher is almost functioning like a machine. Some of those segments could be transferred to film or tape and free the teacher for more interactive or motivating functions.

The full article can be obtained by writing: Merill Library and Learning Resource Program, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 84321.



* Taken from "Instructional Improvement & Evaluation" Dec. 1973 Vol. 1, No.2

"But we've got to make him a faculty member . . . it's his projector."